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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 000185

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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - A POSITIVE CHANGE IN MEDIA ATTITUDES

11. (SBU) Summary: A week before the January 30 election of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as president of Somalia, mainstream radio stations in Mogadishu convened a meeting of senior managers and passed a resolution on the way forward following the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia. The 11 attendees, all heads of private radio stations, resolved to give peace programs first priority in their broadcasts and encourage professionalism and media ethics in reporting. The meeting also focused on media coverage of continuing incidents of violence, hate sermons delivered in mosques, and call-in telephone interviews with unspecified individuals advocating for the implementation of Islamic law. The attendees concluded that all media stations should steer clear of any incident that is deemed to jeopardize the ongoing peace and reconciliation efforts in the country. Since the subsequent election of Sharif, outlets appear to have adhered to these resolutions, to the benefit of the new administration. End Summary.

A New Resolve
From the Media

12. (SBU) Eleven heads of media outlets met on January 27 in Mogadishu to discuss the role of media in the Somali political process, specifically focusing on the dawning of a new era with the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia. The stations represented included HornAfrik, Shabelle, Simba, Somaliweyn, Holy Koran, Radio Voice of Peace, Banadir, Harmo, Sahan, and Radio Mogadishu. The session became even more relevant with the January 30 election of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as president of Somalia and the owners recognizing their role in supporting this new regime. The station managers discussed how to counter threats from extremists who threatened violence if denied air time, airing of extremist mosque lectures, and support for actors like AMISOM.

Insurgents Don't Disclose Identities
When Seeking Interviews

13. (SBU) The owners noted the threat from radical Islamist groups who seek to convey their extremist views to the public by requesting anonymous radio interviews, and then threaten to kill reporters if denied the interview opportunity. Realizing the uncivilized nature of their operations, radical Islamists seek never to reveal their identities, bases of operations and even their true affiliations when speaking to the media. Instead, they call radio stations from their hide-outs and homes and ask for an interview using pseudonyms and fictitious titles and associations.

14. (SBU) Mogadishu-based director of Simba radio Abdullahi Ali Farah

said almost every radio station operates in fear of the extremists and that there is a great need for "us to liberate ourselves out of this captivity." He gave the example of a situation where reporters are captured, blindfolded and coerced to report on insurgent statements. After the abductions, the journalists were freed and told to broadcast the recorded items, failing which the extremists threatened to kill the reporter. Out of fear, many stations are forced to broadcast these sorts of interviews and telephone calls. The callers do not accept tough questions from journalists seeking to give balanced reporting. Muktar Mohamed, Director of Shabelle radio in Mogadishu, said, "You dare ask them questions touching on their ill-mannered behavior, such as the killing of innocent people and attacks on African Union peacekeepers, and the telephone line goes dead immediately."

Mosques Used As Platforms for Hate Speeches

15. (SBU) The owners also discussed radical clerics in Mogadishu mosques who frequently delivered lectures and religious decrees calling for violence and continuation of jihad and which, on many occasions, generated media coverage. Following the pull-out of Ethiopian forces in early January and election of Sharif as president, radical clerics preached for a fresh jihad against the new government, alleging it was still a pro-Ethiopia institution and an American puppet. On January 3, Simba director Farah said he was asked by mosque clerics to broadcast anti-Sharif taped religious lectures on his radio. "They accused me of favoring some groups when I refused to air the lectures," said Farah. The taped lectures were recorded in Nairobi by Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Umal, a known

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radical cleric at the Sixth Street Mosque in Nairobi's Eastleigh neighborhood.

Radio Stations Resolve to Sideline Extremist Views

16. (SBU) At the end of the session, the attendees resolved that, since the Ethiopian troops had left the country, there were no excuses for continuing violence. For this reason, media stations pledged to fully support the new government's peace and reconciliation efforts. As part of their professional responsibility, the representatives promised to suspend call-in interviews from unidentified persons, to cease reporting on violent incidents against AMISOM troops and government forces, and also to refuse to air religious lectures. The stations agreed on a new set of operating rules, requiring interviews to be conducted in person and interviewees to be ready to answer all questions, even the difficult ones. The stations also noted the importance of avoiding conveying reports from people claiming to be eye witnesses and giving detailed accounts at the scenes of violence without independent verification of the reports.

Extremists Feeling the Heat

17. (SBU) Since private radio stations in Mogadishu began bravely implementing the January 27 changes, violent incidents have significantly decreased. Notable exceptions have included two suicide attacks against AMISOM in the last three weeks and reports of a February 4 media head assassination (septel). Following the set conditions, radio stations have received threats from anonymous callers demanding that the stations rescind their decisions.

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